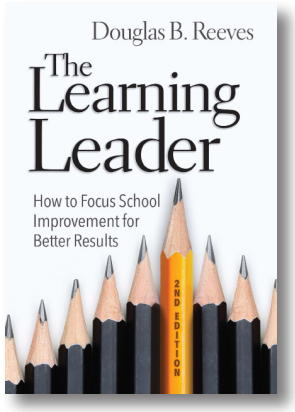
ASCD LEADERSHIP SUMMARIES for EDUCATORS

The Learning Leader

How to Focus School Improvement for Better Results

Second Edition



by **Douglas B. Reeves**

Contents

THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

School improvement can often feel like a losing battle, but it doesn't have to be.

In the fully revised and updated second edition of *The Learning Leader*, Douglas B. Reeves helps leadership teams go beyond excuses to capitalize on their strengths, reduce their weaknesses, and reset their mindset and priorities to achieve unprecedented success.

Reeves asserts that when leaders focus exclusively on results, they fail to measure and understand the importance of their own actions. He stresses that effective leadership is neither a unitary skill nor a solitary activity. He helps leaders reconceptualize their roles in the school improvement process and motivate themselves and their colleagues to keep working to better serve their students.

The Learning Leader will provide guidance for the most challenged schools. Perhaps a hero can win a battle here and there, but it takes a team to prevail over the long term.

IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

- The specific leadership actions most linked to improved results.
- Why collaboration has become an imperative.
- The distortions that occur when results are the sole focus.
- The specific, actionable elements of successful school improvement plans.

Based on *The Learning Leader, 2nd Edition,* by Douglas B. Reeves. Published by Soundview Executive Book Summaries® (ISSN 0747-2196), 2 Christy Drive, Suite 302, Chadds Ford, PA 19317 USA. • To subscribe, visit www.ascd.org or contact ASCD, 1703 N Beauregard Street, Alexandria, VA 22311.

Introduction: The Leadership for Learning Framework

One thing that neither health threats nor economic calamity will ever change is the need for value-based leadership, characterized by decision makers who share their successes, admit their mistakes quickly, and demonstrate to every stakeholder that no external condition stops the imperative for learning. We need Learning Leaders more than ever.

The Leadership for Learning Framework is a framework for success. Basically, it helps leaders identify and distinguish among four different types of educators.

Lucky leaders and teachers achieve high results but don't know how their practices influence achievement. "Lucky" schools tend to treat their best teachers shabbily because they do not recognize their extraordinary qualities.

Losing leaders and teachers are self-defeating in "Losing" schools, who keep doing the same thing and expecting different results.

Learning leaders and teachers have not yet achieved desired results, but they possess deep insights into the antecedents of excellence (the observable qualities in leadership, teaching, curriculum, parental engagement, and other areas that help us better understand how results are achieved). These leaders and teachers look at data and, rather than blaming the students or expressing bewilderment at their lack of success, they dig deeply into the data on student performance and teaching practices.

Leading leaders and teachers enjoy an optimal combination of high results and a deep understanding of the antecedents of excellence, yet they are perpetually seeking opportunities to improve.

Our focus here is on the Learning and Leading leaders and teachers. Both types offer hard work and receive scant recognition. We must vigorously pursue their social-emotional learning by providing the professional support and emotional nurturing they need to persevere in their work.

There are three main takeaways from the research: that leadership, teaching, and adult actions matter; that certain leadership actions are proven to raise student achievement and educational equity; and that leadership is neither a unitary skill nor a solitary activity.

Research further suggests that school improvement plans need to include specific, actionable elements if they are to succeed. The three most important elements are inquiry, implementation, and monitoring:

- **Inquiry** is the degree to which leaders correctly analyze the underlying causes of deficiencies and successes in student achievement and equity. Our analysis makes it clear that successful inquiry attributes causes to adults in the educational system—teachers, school leaders, and policymakers—whereas unsuccessful inquiry attributes causes to students. In other words, "blame the victim" is not only a morally reprehensible position but also statistically untrue.
- **Implementation** is the degree to which school improvement processes are implemented at the student and classroom level. Successful planners recognize that implementation is a continuous process with varying degrees of effectiveness rather than simply something we either do or don't do.
- **Monitoring** is an essential component of school improvement. The research is clear: frequency of monitoring is strongly associated with improvements in educational achievement and equity.

The Results Paradox

Leaders respond to what is measured, especially when what is measured determines their professional longevity. Unfortunately, as examples from business, medicine, and education show, the maxim "what gets measured gets done" has disastrous effects. We pursue success by clamoring for results, and that pursuit often leads to calamity.

Yet most jurisdictions tenaciously cling to testing as the best way to measure student success.

There is a real effect on students' lives. For example, if the only objective is improved test scores, it's much faster and easier to have underperforming students drop out of school than to craft effective intervention programs for them.

At the elementary school level, distortions result from a focus on results. If reading and math are all that matter, then we forget about science and social studies. When accountability starts only at 3rd grade, prekindergarten and kindergarten are ignored and devalued in many systems.

The "results paradox" shows us that when we focus only on results without focusing on the causes behind the results, the achievements we celebrate will be illusory. If the only results that matter are test scores, then we reward cheating or, at

the very least, a distorted and narrowly focused curriculum.

Challenging Leadership Myths: Hope for the Exhausted Leader

Influential leadership thinker Dan Heath's book *Upstream* makes the fundamental argument that most leadership decisions are reactive. We get the bad news, then try to solve yesterday's challenges. A far more effective process is to consider the root causes of problems and solve tomorrow's problems—not today's. In order to engage in "upstream thinking," it is important to look at effects *and* causes.

Analytical Models

Whereas a regression coefficient can express the statistical relationship between demographic factors and student achievement, only a narrative analysis will explain why some students and teachers defy the odds and perform at an exceptionally high level despite the presence of factors statistically associated with low achievement.

For example, there is a persistent gap between the achievement of Black and Hispanic children and their Caucasian counterparts. The purported causes range from institutional racism to disparities in housing and parental employment opportunities. More rarely studied are the differences in the professional practices of leaders and teachers. Nevertheless, all those factors have strong correlations with low student achievement, and many are related to one another.

The central challenge of analytical leadership is that we must know more than the interaction between variables. Every time we are confronted with the apparent association between two variables, we must ask: What other variables are in the equation? Which variables are most important? What is the sequence of the variables? Which variables are most subject to our influence, and which are intractable?

Relationship Models

The key requirements for leaders include compassion, trust, inspiration, and deep caring. The foundations of caring relationships include honesty and trust. These qualities make up what Apple University leader Kim Scott calls "radical candor." Relationships that are so fragile that they require an unremitting stream of positive reinforcement without regard to the accuracy of the feedback are what Scott calls "ruinous empathy." This dynamic, in which professionals are unwilling to challenge one another to be their very best, is mimicked in the classroom.

Architectural Leadership: Why You Cannot Do It Alone

The leader's task is to create an organization that is exemplary in every dimension—not to engage in the myth that a single person bears the burden of exemplary performance in all areas.

Many definitions of leadership perpetuate the myth of the lone leader, so here's an alternative definition in their place, from *The Daily Disciplines of Leadership*: "Leaders are the architects of individual and organizational improvement."

This architectural definition of leadership helps us understand that leadership must be distributed. Distributed leadership is based on trust and on the certain knowledge that no single leader possesses the knowledge, skills, and talent to lead an organization alone.

For example, the architect of the Temple of Concord, a 2600-year-old structure in Sicily, knew how all the puzzle pieces fit together—from the stone masons to the laborers, from the artisans to the engineers. Architectural leaders in education make similar connections, conceptualizing how everyone—bus drivers and cafeteria workers, teachers and support staff, students and parents—fits with everyone else.

Furthermore, architectural leaders know that every class—music, technology, art, physical education, physics, culinary arts, welding, and other subject areas —is an opportunity for students to engage in creativity, literacy, project management, personal responsibility, teamwork, and a host of other skills that will contribute to their success.

In schools led by architectural leaders, there is no such thing as a "nonacademic" class, assembly, or experience, nor is the faculty divided between those who are accountable and those who are not. Every certified and noncertified staff member in the architecturally led school supports a common focus on improved teaching and learning.

What Matters Most: From Planning to Performance

Leadership time and attention are pulled in many directions as stakeholders compete for resources, leadership support, and a place at the table where decisions are made.

A combination of quantitative studies of thousands of schools and case studies of the impact of focused leaders reveals that when leaders concentrate on a few high-lever-

age strategies, students benefit. There is a political price to pay for focused leadership, because making choices among competing demands requires a leader to say no to many popular initiatives. The evidence concludes that the discipline of concentrated leadership is worth the cost of an occasional loss of popularity.

The Virtues of "Ugly" Plans

Imagine two principals, both of whom approach their superintendent with planning documents a couple of months after the beginning of the school year.

The first principal is equipped with a plan that meets every format requirement, with every *i* dotted and every *t* crossed. It has received the blessing of the high priests of planning. Neatly packaged in plastic pocket protectors, the plan is untouched by human hands and uninformed by the changing realities of students and faculty. By any measure, it is a pretty plan.

The second principal approaches the superintendent with a decidedly ugly plan. The pages are dog-eared and smudged, with some elements crossed out and others added in the margins. Apologetically, he explains that the needs of students and families change, and the purpose of his planning meetings is not to execute a neat plan but to continually revise a messy one.

Economist Tim Harford argues that evidence from neuroscience—as well as case studies from the classroom to the boardroom—require that responses to complex challenges require rapidly changing plans. Messy is not the same as chaotic. Harford's suggestion is not that leaders swing from one priority to the next without thought; rather, leaders recognize that as conditions and needs change, so must plans.

When it comes to planning documents, ugly beats pretty, provided that ugly is a reflection not of wanton messiness but of the continuous updates and modifications that make planning documents correspond to reality.

Transforming Research into Action

San Bernardino City Unified School District, one of the nation's poorest school systems, has dramatically reduced student failure over a few years despite the persistently high poverty rate. And from 2015 to 2019, Dearborn, Michigan, increased its high school graduation rate from 67 percent to 97 percent, even while the percentage of low-income students and English language learners increased.

This is not the story of some kind of singularity—a uniquely great teacher, principal, or superintendent—but rather of the distributed leadership and architectural leadership described above.

Synthesis of the research reveals that low-income, ethnically diverse schools with high student achievement rates all adhere to the following practices:

- **Focus constantly and consistently on student achievement.** These schools post visible indicators of success on the walls and in the trophy cases. School leaders also prioritize student achievement over administrative details and understand that good relationships with both colleagues and students are nonnegotiable.
- **Emphasize nonfiction writing in all classes.** When students take part in more nonfiction writing, achievement improves in all content areas—not just in English language arts.
- **Use frequent common assessments.** In order to be effective, frequent common assessments must be an integral part of the teaching, leadership, and learning cycle.
- **Analyze data constructively.** Rather than using data to rate, rank, sort, or humiliate students, teachers in successful schools use data as celebrations of teacher effectiveness.
- **Score student work collaboratively.** Many educators draft standards and evaluate work collaboratively using a uniform method. That way, they are able to identify inconsistencies in scoring and even save time.
- **Engage in units of instruction across disciplines.** Students need to know that what they are learning has applications, not only beyond the test but also in other disciplines. For example, learning geometry will also help them understand the basics of graphic design, quilting, and carpentry.
- **Organize schools as professional learning communities (PLCs).** PLCs work in teams rather than in isolation and take collective responsibility for student learning. They set clear and specific expectations for students, implement a guaranteed and viable curriculum, and use common formative assessments that are based on that curriculum.

Leadership and Effective Feedback: The Dilemmas of Grading

Why are issues of grading and feedback the concern of leaders? Because leaders are responsible for connecting values with practice. If the mission and vision statements of a school and district are committed to equity and fairness, for example, then any practice—including grading practices—that violates those values must be challenged by leaders.

In today's classrooms, letter grades very often do not reflect student achievement. We have long tolerated this status quo out of a belief that teaching is a private endeavor and grading policies are the exclusive domain of those private practitioners. However, a growing chorus of voices is calling for the "de-privatization" of professional practices in teaching and leadership.

If individual practitioners assign grades that are fair, accurate, and effective, then they should be free to be as creative in their practices as they want. But it helps for all teachers in a school to be on the same page. This takes intensive work. Without agreement among educators about grading processes, we are doomed to work in an unfair system.

Two distortions plague grading systems: inflating the grades of low-performing students and reducing the grades of high-performing students. The common theme of both is that we elevate compliance over proficiency.

We err gravely when we conflate good behavior with proficiency. Are we rewarding some students for being academically proficient in a complex and competitive world? Or are we rewarding them for being quiet, compliant, polite, and acquiescent to the authority figures around them?

In addition, to insist on the use of a 0 on a 100-point scale is to assert that work that is not turned in is worthy of a penalty of 0. Because just two or three 0s can cause a student to fail an entire semester, doling them out for missing work is a punishment out of proportion with the offense.

Some grading systems maintain rigor while avoiding the errors inherent in using 0s and averages. One was instituted by a secondary school faculty that agreed every student would receive six assessments each quarter. The definition of assessment was left to the teacher—it could be a lab, an essay, or a musical presentation, depending on the context of the class. Each assessment would be scored according to a four-point scale as follows: 4 = Exemplary; 3 = Proficient; 2 = Progressing; 1 = Not meeting standards.

The grading system was uniform and simple: A = Four assessments scored "exemplary" and two scored at least "proficient"; B = Four assessments scored "proficient" and two scored at least "progressing"; C = Three assessments scored at least "proficient."

Any performance lower than a C was scored as IP (In Progress) for two weeks after each grading period, and it would then become an F unless the student submitted work up to the standards of a C. When students received low scores on assessments, they were encouraged to work harder and resubmit work.

When grading systems are mathematically flawed (as in the case of 0s and averages), when they are unfair (as in the case of the same performance receiving dramatically different marks from different teachers), and when they are ineffective (as in the case of grades being utterly unrelated to student achievement), then fundamental values of equity and fairness have been violated. It is the leader's role to ensure that practice is consistent with values.

Putting It All Together: The Five Essential Transformations of Leadership for Learning

Committing to the Leadership for Learning Framework means committing to a set of interconnected journeys.

1. From islands of excellence to systemic impact. In even the most troubled schools and systems, there are almost always islands of excellence—classrooms where 100 percent of special education students are meeting state standards; there is little or no achievement gap related to student demographic characteristics; and multilingual students are reading, writing, and speaking English with joyous enthusiasm.

Though it is imperative that leaders find, document, and recognize these islands, they must also take the next step and transform them into systemic successes. Transforming islands of excellence into systemic successes requires leaders to focus their energy and time more narrowly. One way to do this is by thinking of the leadership map not so much as a series of nodes but as a small number of hubs.

2. From nodes to hubs. Each node on the leadership map implies its own system of connections. By shifting their attention from nodes to hubs, leaders can sharpen their focus on what matters most. Not every island of excellence

or every island of mediocrity deserves the leader's attention. Rather, the leader must identify and focus on hubs, both those that hold the key for great improvement and those to watch out for as emerging networks of negativity.

3. From frantic to focused. Focused leaders engage in daily disciplines that maximize their energy, bringing the highest level of concentrated effort to bear on the most important challenges. One effective time-management discipline to consider is as simple as avoiding lines. Be the first or last in a line, but don't be in the middle of a line unless you can use that time to read or listen to important information, reflect in a focused and systematic way, or otherwise avoid more than a few seconds of wasted time.

4. From private to public. The heart of professional learning communities is not only asking the four questions about learning, assessment, intervention, and enrichment but also assessing the functioning of collaborative teams in which teachers and leaders share openly what works—and what doesn't—in their classrooms and schools.

Public professional practices are not merely the result of scheduled events, such as collaborative scoring conferences. When fully integrated into a school, the public practice that is at the heart of professional learning communities is simply business as usual, with colleagues casually exchanging ideas, assessments, writing prompts, and student work. They share their practices and related student achievement results with one another daily.

5. From the bell curve to the mountain. The difference between those who are committed to long-term sustainable change and those who aren't lies in an understanding of how human potential and achievement are distributed. According to what is known to statisticians as "normal distribution" (commonly graphed as the bell curve), when it comes to most endeavors, a few will wildly succeed, a few will abjectly fail, and a majority will settle somewhere in middle. The bell curve has a strong foundation in observed behavior.

We value the extraordinary and ascribe exceptional features to those we love (including ourselves), but when we are on the other end of the analysis—receiving evaluation rather than assigning it—we find "normal" or anything resembling the middle of the bell curve unacceptable.

How do we distinguish the extraordinary from the ordinary? This is a question faced by every teacher and educational leader. In many ways, our job is to change the distribution of skills and talents from normal to extraordinary. If we receive a bell and deliver a bell, then we have done nothing more than deliver human cargo from one year to the next. But if we receive a bell and deliver a mountain, then we have done something extraordinary indeed.

Each incremental move from the bell curve to the mountain represents a teacher who would not give up, a school leader who did not wait for universal buy-in, a student whose work ethic defied traditional expectations, a parent who sought challenge and encouragement, and a school board member who supported teachers and administrators who demanded more over politically connected constituencies that clamored for high grades for unacceptable work.

Every decision we make influences leadership and learning. It all comes down to this: What we do matters.

Douglas B. Reeves is the author of more than 40 books and 100 articles on educational leadership and student achievement. Twice named to the Harvard University Distinguished Author Series, Doug received the Contribution to the Field Award from the National Staff Development Council (now Learning Forward) and was named the Brock International Laureate for his contributions to education. Doug's research and teaching have taken him to 50 states and more than 40 countries. *Douglas.Reeves@CreativeLeadership.net*